

# Outside Politics: Everyday Life and the Private Dimension of Citizenship in South Eastern Europe

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## Abstract

What meaning do people attach to citizenship in everyday life? When and how does citizenship become a theme in seemingly mundane and a-political conversations? And how are reconfigurations of citizenship experienced in ordinary life situations? In this essay, I ask these questions in the context of the region of the former Yugoslavia, which for more than two decades now has been a true laboratory of citizenship changes.

A large body of research on citizenship, in South Eastern Europe and elsewhere, is centered on the state, and on interactions between the state and civil society. It examines, for example, legal practices, political institutions, bureaucratic settings, or non-governmental associations. In this essay, however, I ask how people in everyday circumstances, i.e. outside the realm of organized politics and voluntary associations, observe, address or avoid citizenship issues. To that end I try to find out, for example, what private meanings people attach to official documents and institutions, or I seek to gain insight into how people talk to each other about their encounters with public administrations, and how they imagine and discuss their own role as (active) citizens. Furthermore, I explore how they, in their conversations with an interested foreign visitor like me, explain, or avoid to explain, their views on (contentious) politics.

These are of course large topics, and they are impossible to address in an exhaustive and representative manner. My strategy in this essay is more modest: I seek to formulate reflections on the basis of a personal selection of fieldwork experiences in a few small-scale sites across the region of the former Yugoslavia. These fieldwork experiences were gathered over the recent years during stays at the homes of acquaintances and host families, and during participation in various cultural or political events (e.g. public commemorations, religious meetings, underground cultural gatherings, and political protests), and they have served as the basis for my non-fiction novel *EX*, published in Dutch in the spring of 2014 by De Bezige Bij in Amsterdam.

While in the book I use a broad panorama of everyday encounters and coincidences to weave a literary narrative about the region, in this essay I treat these personal stories rather as tentative ethnographic evidence and as a basis to suggest a number of ways to investigate and understand the relationship between the personal and the political.